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SUBJECT: MADAGASCAR/COMOROS/ZIMBABWE: FRANCE TAKING  
LOW-PROFILE POSITIONS

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor William Jordan, 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: MFA AF DAS-equivalent Francois Barateau on February 27 said that France was taking a low-profile with respect to Madagascar, Comoros, and Zimbabwe. On Madagascar, the French are supporting the UN and the international community's efforts to promote dialogue between President Ravalomanana and former Antananarivo Mayor Rajoelina, but have cut back on public statements and believe that Ravalomanana must address his critics' concerns as part of any reconciliation process. The French are concerned that President Sambi's efforts to change the Comoran constitution and prolong his mandate are potentially destabilizing. The GOF is refraining from speaking directly to Sambi because of Comoran sensitivities about France's intruding into Comoran affairs. The French are consulting with others in the region and asking that they express shared concerns to Comoran authorities. Barateau said that France and EU partners were relieved and encouraged by the formation of a government in Zimbabwe but would watch attentively for actual changes on the ground before carrying out any policy changes. END SUMMARY.

Madagascar

¶2. (C) MFA AF/S DAS-equivalent Francois Barateau on February 27 briefed on Madagascar, Comoros, and Zimbabwe. Barateau had spent several days in Madagascar when the current crisis arose. He said that the situation there was a complete tragedy, resulting largely from the personal animosity and rivalry between President Ravalomanana and former Antananarivo Mayor Rajoelina, two politicians from the same business and social milieu whose profiles were quite similar. Barateau said that he was dismayed when Ravalomanana failed to continue his talks with Rajoelina earlier in the week. This did not bode well given the optimism that had arisen when the two decided to hold face-to-face talks. Barateau said that he was not sure if the situation would take a turn for the worse, but he found no comfort in the ending of the talks.

¶3. (C) Barateau said that France was trying to maintain a low-profile in Madagascar, in part because of the way that both sides tried to exploit phone calls FM Kouchner had made to Ravalomanana and Rajoelina when the crisis first erupted; both had tried to claim that Kouchner (and France) supported one camp over the other. Moreover, Barateau explained, given France's significant and historical presence in Madagascar, anything France said or did, especially in times of crisis, tended to be given more weight than it deserved. Barateau indicated that France would try to stay out of the public debate in order not to distract from the need to get the two sides to resolve their differences, although he said the MFA would issue a communiqué from time to time if events

warranted a French comment and if such a comment would help move things in the right direction.

¶4. (C) Barateau said that France was fully supportive of UN efforts to facilitate a resolution of Madagascar's crisis, including UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon's efforts along with those of A/UNSYG Menkerios and former Mali FM Tiebile Drame, the UN's new Senior Mediator. France's priority remained an agreed-upon political resolution acceptable to both sides. Barateau stressed, however, that President Ravalomanana, a flawed president, needed to recognize and address his critics' concerns as a part of any such political reconciliation. "In order to really settle this, we think Ravalomanana needs to make concessions to his critics, who have rightfully pointed out his mistakes. He cannot simply expect that everything will go back to the way things were before the crisis," Barateau remarked.

Comoros

¶5. (C) France was concerned about Comoran President Sambi's attempts to revise the constitution and to add one-year to his four-year mandate, Barateau said. These were potentially destabilizing developments that risked upsetting the fragile balance on which the Union of the Comoros depended. Barateau noted signs that the residents of Moheli might not participate in the referendum on Sambi's initiatives, an early indication that Sambi's plan could lead to trouble.

¶6. (C) Barateau said that France was trying to play a low-key role in the Comoros with respect to Sambi. He said that even more so than the Malagasy, Comorans were acutely

PARIS 00000303 002 OF 002

sensitive to any French "involvement" in Comoran affairs and that sometimes it was best to keep quiet. However, Barateau said that France was consulting with Comoros's neighbors and sharing French concerns about Sambi's plans with them, and asking the neighbors to convey whatever concerns they might have to the Comoran leadership.

¶7. (C) Barateau quickly added that the present time was a very sensitive moment for France and Comoros, given the March 29 vote in Mayotte on whether Mayotte would become a full-fledged French Overseas Department, a step up from its status as a "Departmental Collectivity." Barateau was very direct in saying there should be no ambiguity about this vote: "Everyone there is French. It's just a question of what administrative label we put on the island." He had no doubt that Mayotte would vote for full Overseas Department status. Barateau conceded that the Mayotte vote was likely fueling ever-present Comoran suspicions about France's role in the islands and the alleged French desire to exert undue influence over the Union via its presence in Mayotte, which would likely now be strengthened.

Zimbabwe

¶8. (C) In a brief discussion of Zimbabwe, Barateau said that France and its EU partners were relieved that at last a government had been formed in Harare that included Morgan Tsvangirai and others opposition figures. However, while encouraging, this was a very fresh development; France and the EU would monitor the situation very carefully and would carry out any policy changes towards Zimbabwe (i.e., in a warming direction) if and only if there were meaningful developments on the ground. In the meantime the GOF and other EU members would remain vigilant for any signs of backsliding or recalcitrance on Mugabe's part.

PEKALA